TALES FROM THE BLACKFOOT RESERVE

Peter Erasmus

This is the story of a colorful and noteworthy character of the early west, Peter Erasmus.

Peter Erasmus was a Cree Half-breed, born in Manitoba in (approx.) 1840. He was educated at St. Johnss College in Winnipeg; and came west with the Hector expedition, as guide and interpreter. It was he who said that the kicking horse, for which the Kicking Horse Pass was named, was not a horse, but a mule. He also acted as interpreter on several of the treaties between the Indians and the whites.

In 1906, when the need for his services was past the government granted him a small pension, and he went to live on the Blackfoot reservation at Gleichen. He lived there till 1912, in rooms over the agency; occupying himselfe in writing down the folklore of the Indians- tales that he had heard from his grand mother, seventy years before. Unfortunately, his manuscript was lost when completed. A woman from the east borrowed them to copy some of the stories and never returned them. Efforts were made to recover this work of six years for the old man, but they were of no avail.

In 1913 Peter Erasmus went north to Cold Lake, where there was a large colony of breeds. He saw the need for education there and opened a school, which he taught with a fine disregard for rules and regulations, putting inspectors letters and departmental protests alike into the fire. He carried on this school for several years, and did a great deal to raise the ~~sta~~ standard of literacy among the breeds. He died at the age of ninety four, and is buried at Cold Lake.

This is one of the many stories he used to tell the children of Mr. George Gooderham, the Indian agent at Gleichen.

Said Peter:" One day I was riding up the Bow River Valley west of Nort Camp. The valley there winds in and out (as a snake travels) with high cut banks on either side. I heard a loud rustle, and I said to myself, "There is a Chinook coming".

Well, I rode around the next bend, and there I found the rustle. The whole

valley was full of buffalo,stampeding towards me. Well: There was cutbank on one side of me.No way out there. River on the other side of me-full of buffalo swimming. No way out there.I was young and supple in those days. So I waited till the head of the Stampede was right up to me,then I jumped from my horse to the backs of the leaders,and ran all the way across their backs to safety. But my horse was killed."

The Cree Jump.

The Blackfeet and the Crees were bitter enemies. Many bloody battles were fought between the two tribes,and for years the Blackfeet considered their Sundance incomplete unless the Sundance fires were lit on the living bodies of Cree Captives.Then for awhile the enmity died away a little. Various Councils of peace were held,and fairly friendly relations were established between the tribes.But an incident occured which fanned it to white heat again.

One Morning in the late fall,a young Blackfoot boy,Eagle Man by name went out to catch some horses which were pasturing near a marsh.Noticing that the reeds in the marsh were moving against the wind,Eagle Man went to investigate and found a small party og Crees in war dress,apparently bent on horse stealing.They started in pursuit of Eagle Man who raced back to wards the camp to give the alarm. The Crees caught him a few rods from the camp and scalped Him.

The Crees were camped at the top of a cut bank about four miles fro the place where Eagle Man found the raiding party.There were a number of warriors,and all had their squaws andpapooses with them. The Blackfeet joined battle with the Crees at the top of this cliff,about a quarter of a mile from the Cree encampment.The battle began badly for the blackfeet,and didn't improve as it continued.Then one enterprising Blackfoot sub-chief got a brainwave. He collected a few of his men and dashed back to the Cree Camp,rounded up the women and children and pushed them of the cliff - two hundred feet onto the rocks at the edge of the river. The

Crees, hearing the cries of the women became disorganized,and lost the battle to the Blackfeet. Rather than face the Blackfoot torture,a great many of them jumped from the top of the cutbank,into the river. Some of the Blackfeet followed them into the river and scalped them in the water.The bodies were left at the foot of the bank and parts of the skeletons are still to be seen there.to this day. The Indians s ay that every year on the date on which the massacre took place, the ghosts of those who took part in it come back and re-enact it. No Blackfoot could be hired to go near the Cree Jump at night and I know a good many white men who give it a wide berth too.

The Tobacco Dance

Every primitive people holds its Fertility festival in some form or another.It is one of the oldest rites in the world.It is celebrated with the idea of persuading the gods to grant a more bounteous growth in both plants and animals, which means more food for the tribe. In some tribes it takes the form of a sacrifice in which the plant or anomal is cut up in small pieces and scattered over the surrounding country,in the belief that this will caus that animal to become more plentiful.

The Blackfoot tribe, one of the theree tribes in America which still celebrate it,hold the Tobacco dance every year towards the end of May. The Indians prepare all year for this feast. They get pieces of liver,kidney and othe orgams,dry them,pound them into a powder and mix them into the finest possible kind of fertilizer.This is mixed in a bag with the seeds of the Tobacco plant This is genuine tobacco,the seeds of which have been carefully saved from yr to year,and carefully guarded. Where the Blackfeet obtained the seed in the first place nobody knows.The Indians themselves say that it was brought to the Indians by Naa-tou-ssaw himself in person,in the beginning of time.

The festival lasts till a thousand songs have been sung and a thousand dances ~~have been danced~~ danced and a thousand prayers have been said.The prayer are to Naa-tou-ssaw for a heavy growth of fruit,grass and the fertility of animals.Women pray for children.Pregnant women recieve special honor and

attention during this time.The tobacco seed is put into bags which are fixed on sticks shaped something like this . These sticks are carried by young men who ride in the direction of the sun with them.When the plots which have been specially prepared for the seed are reached,the old men plant the tobacco with more prayers and more ceremony.When the last seed has been planted,the medicine man warns the assembled people of the tabu on that plot,and that an one entering the enclosure will die.The Indians are most superstitious,and to my knowledge,the tabu has only been defied once.Mr. Dave Brerton,a stockman on the resrve,defied the tabu and entered one of the plots. Afew days later his body was found near the C.P.R. right of way near North Camp.He had apparently been thrown from his horse and killed.The Indians,however,believe that he was struck down by Naa-tou-ssaw for defying the tabu and avoid these plot more carefully than ever.